

For the Common Good? Artistic Practices and Civil Society in Tunisia¹

Anthony Downey

Doing art means displacing art's borders, just as doing politics means displacing the borders of what is acknowledged as the political ...

*Jacques Rancière*²

The job of civil society is to launch genuine debate on political, economic, and cultural emancipation, and to avoid superficial and unproductive polarization.

*Tariq Ramadan*³

On 10 June 2012, in La Marsa, a city adjacent to Tunis, the art exhibition *Printemps des Arts* (*Springtime of the Arts*) came to an end amidst ugly protests from artists involved in the show and protestors—largely identified as Salafis (a collective term used for the most conservative Islamists)—who were offended by the content of some of the works on display. The two groups became locked in increasingly acrimonious exchanges that extended to physical abuse, a running battle with local police, death threats, destruction of artworks, the vandalization of the Palais Abdelliya, where the exhibition was held, and a call for Mehdi Mabrouk, the Tunisian Minister for Culture, to resign. In the days that followed, protestors alleged blasphemy and used Facebook to publicize what were later determined to be doctored images of works in the original show.⁴ The clashes with police represented the single largest show of public unrest since the revolution in Tunisia, and the Palais Abdelliya, which had held *Printemps des Arts* for over a decade without much by way of previous controversy, effectively became central to the debate around what could be displayed in a public space and who could have access to it. It also foregrounded a question that has become central to every discussion around political freedom and self-determination: who controls civil, secular, cultural, public, religious and political space in modern-day Tunisia?

The intention to provoke debate about cultural and political space had been clearly outlined in the curator Meriem Bouderbala's accompanying text for the show's catalogue, in which she proposed that '[i]n the current context, it is all about occupying cultural territory, of allowing everyone access to it and contributing to a strong democratic cultural constitution that demonstrates the strength of Tunisia's creative potential'.⁵ These lofty sentiments display a degree of naivety: the use of terms such as 'occupying' and 'constitution' and, later in the same text, 'resistance' and 'civil society', placed *Printemps des Arts* firmly in the realm of Tunisia's political turmoil. The subsequent reaction from protestors was therefore inevitable—and, indeed, seemed to be part of the avowed intention behind the show.⁶ Tunisia, under the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled for 34 years until his ignominious departure in 2011, had not seen much by way of contemporary art events and certainly none that had addressed issues around secularism, human rights, freedom of expression, gender, repression and the female form.⁷ Controversy was bound to ensue insofar as *Printemps des Arts* was placed in an antagonistic realm where debates about public space and secular self-determination were key to any political narrative of post-revolutionary Tunisia. Whatever the rights and wrongs of this situation, and it is evident that both sides of the argument have since been strained to mean different things to different people, culture is a political battleground in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

In the days following the attacks on the exhibition, it was announced that the Palais Abdelliya would be closed down as a cultural venue. On *Tunisia 1*, a national evening news programme, Nouredine El Khademi, the Minister of Religious Affairs, accused the artists of insulting Islam and called upon Tunisians to defend their religion. Following violence across a number of towns and cities, in the wake of such an incendiary call, dawn to dusk curfews were imposed. If a further sense of what is at stake in the practices and institutional contexts of culture in modern-day Tunisia is needed, we need look no further than the unhelpful interjection by the Imam of the Zitouna mosque in Medina of Tunis, Houcine Laabidi, who explicitly called for the death of all the artists involved in the exhibition.

Putting to one side *Printemps des Arts'* engagement with what are considered by some to be taboo subjects, the combustive mix of political opportunism and civil rights focused further attention on what still remains to this day a fraught and hard-won freedom from despotism in Tunisia.⁸ The events surrounding *Printemps des Arts* highlight a key sociopolitical element in the post-revolutionary landscape of Tunisia, a factor that is crucial to understanding fundamental aspects of what is happening in other countries that underwent revolution across the region: we are effectively witnessing the re-emergence of institutions associated with civil society. If we understand civil society as an attempt to reconcile public and private mores without resort to state control or governmental decree, then these open, often rancorous

confrontations are not only inevitable but, in the name of free speech, necessary. Nevertheless, the events outlined above also direct us to a core element in visual culture: it produces mini-publics, debates and audiences that, in turn, form part of larger organizations and informal social networks that are an indelible part of civil society and the public sphere. And this fact, for interim governments unused to the manifestation of civil society, produces both suspicion and occasional kneejerk reactions to cultural events.

Across North Africa and the Middle East, forms of civil renewal are emerging that are not necessarily associated with the right to vote, the latter seen in the 'West'—if we can still use that term with any degree of critical purchase—as a sign of a democratic order. These ideals of civil renewal involve active citizenship and the strengthening of community bonds through nascent civil and community-based groups and activities, of which cultural practices are but one element, albeit an important one. For writers such as Tariq Ramadan, the emergence of a stable, functioning 'civil state'—a phrase being promoted by a number of Islamist movements across the region—and responsible governance, in the wake of uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, is coterminous with the emergence of a robust civil society.⁹ Without it, Ramadan argues, there can be no emancipatory politics as such. Moreover, without the institution of civil society and forms of civic engagement, the momentum and promise of the various uprisings across the region cannot be sustained. In this context, Ramadan argues that '[a] genuine, tangible process of reform, democratization and liberation cannot take place without a broad-based social movement that mobilizes civil society as well as public and private institutions'.¹⁰ The democratization and emancipation of the Middle East and North Africa depends on the mobilization of civil society, Ramadan argues further, and the key task for Arab civil society is to promote opposition platforms that allow for pluralism.

We turn here to a decisive, two-part question: what role does culture have in the development of civil society and, secondly, can artistic practices negotiate the public sphere, invite participation in cultural issues, and thereafter strengthen the bonds of civil society by inviting voices and agents into the debate about cultural pluralism? Before fully answering this question, we need to address a number of interrelated caveats. For one, civil society may be an arena of contestation within which public concerns are played out, but, as we will see, it is equally a site of exclusion and exclusivity—only certain voices can be heard in the context of any given social sphere, despite claims to the contrary. The contestation between rival groups involved in the uproar surrounding the *Printemps des Arts* affair attests to this sense of contestation. Secondly, to suggest that art as a practice and the cultural institutions it supports, and is in turn supported by, should somehow add to a common good or the goal of civil society is to entertain that most cherished of neo-liberal, state-sponsored ideals: the instrumentalization of culture so that it



▲ Hela Ammar, *Revolution*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.





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Héla Ammar, *la liberté appartient au peuple: Freedom Belongs to the People*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

is answerable to the narrow political priorities of a given moment in time.¹¹ To these, we must add one final caveat: to promote the development of civil society as an ameliorative to the social and political unrest occurring across the region is misguided if we understand the latter only in terms of being a Western import into the region. If we are to fully explore how culture can contribute to a common good that is not simply a function of the state, the outcome of religious edict, or the self-serving logic of the market, we need to explore what exactly is meant by civil society across North Africa and the Middle East and how, importantly, this term is understood in the context of cities that have a majority Muslim population. Whilst advocating art and its institutions as a key factor in the development of civil society across North Africa and the Middle East, moreover, it is crucial that we consider how such practices can both support and equally question the parameters and effectiveness of civil society in countries where it has been largely notable by its absence and, in some cases, widespread proscription.

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Civil society, in the broadest sense, is composed of voluntary social relationships, civic and social organizations, and other institutions that are relatively distinct from government and profit-led initiatives. Clubs, community organizations, men's groups, women's groups, non-governmental organizations, private voluntary organizations, sports groups, environmental activists, cultural groups, religious organizations, social enterprises, academe, activist groups, charities, support groups, trade unions, artists' groups, art institutions, and community-based art projects—all form the bedrock of civil society. In perhaps simplistic terms, civil society is therefore often contrasted with state control and is seen as a bulwark against the excesses of the state and the short-termism of market forces.¹² Understood as a field that exists within social orders but detached from the state (and the market), civil society therefore allows for a community to independently represent itself culturally and politically as a social body—and this is crucial to any discussion of artistic practices in Tunisia today and their impact on social, political and cultural orders. The site of self-identification and public discussion, civil society is a dynamic space: an informal site where social movements develop and call into question the values and ideologies of a given political order. Developed within the context of civil society, these social movements are invariably the expression of common concerns and, moreover, the expression of a collective will towards new forms of self-identification. During times of either state repression—when open, public discussion and disagreement are outlawed—or when markets privatize public space in the name of private interests, civil society invariably struggles to find a foothold, as do the voices and self-determinations of communities.¹³ As a form of symbolic structuring that generates

new identities and collective values, civil society produces sense-making and forms of self-identification; they act, in sum, as autonomous spaces that promote participation in society and its structures.¹⁴

In the wake of the events surrounding *Printemps des Arts* at the Palais Abdelliya in June 2012, Mehdi Mabrouk, the Tunisian Minister for Culture, reportedly said the following: 'It's enough for art to be beautiful, it shouldn't be revolutionary, it should be nice.'¹⁵ This statement, from a Minister of Culture no less, betrays a simplistic attitude towards art as a practice that borders on foolishness. Nevertheless, it is worth exploring its content further because it also goes to the heart of the matter concerning the politics of culture and its imbrication within civil society. In suggesting that artists, be they revolutionary or not, should steer away from the political realm, Mabrouk is actually making a case for the opposite: in arguing that art has no place in politics he is explicitly politicizing art and bringing it into the political sphere, albeit in terms of prohibition. What could be more political than placing a sanction on an activity within a given social order?¹⁶ If art has no place in the political sphere, as Mabrouk suggests, and should thereafter maintain a quaint indifference to it, art is irrevocably politicized. Doing art, to paraphrase my epigraph, is to displace and extend the boundaries of art. In this instance, art as a practice, considered a private pursuit with a public dimension, extends into debates around civil society and thereafter displaces its borders of engagement to include discussions about public space and access to such spaces.

If art is indeed increasingly positioned as 'political' by virtue of being denied a role in the political realm, it is obvious that it is considered capable of potentially altering opinion, not to mention reconfiguring engagement with various communities. Inherent within Mabrouk's offhand and imprudent remark is an often occluded but nonetheless potent counter-proposition that alerts us to art's potential to effect social debate in a country such as Tunisia. Exhibitions in public institutions, of which there are few, are representative of emerging communities, and reactions to them are testament to the sense that what is at stake here is a common ground upon which to voice debate, entertain disagreement and engage in discussions about public and private space, the rights of the individual, freedom of expression, the (often expansive) meaning of the term 'sacred', secular determinism, the role of religion in the workings of state, the need for good, responsible and responsive governance and the principle of rational self-interest in the context of the common good. And central to this is the role of culture in fostering a sense of identity as well as opening up debates about the logic of civic and political imaginations. Art, in this instance, can re-imagine that which often remains unimaginable in political terms.

In March of 2011, a year or so before the events described above, and three months after Ben Ali had been forced into exile on 14 January 2011, a street-based artwork was conceived by a number of artists under the title *Inside Out: Artocracy in Tunisia*. The event featured the portraits of 100 Tunisians—deemed, for want of a better word, ‘ordinary’—placed in prominent positions around the city of Le Kram, a town situated between the port of Tunis and Carthage. The images were posted in places where portraits would have previously hung of the former (and by then disgraced) president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. One of the photographers involved, Marco Berrebi, was reported as saying that *Inside Out* was about giving people the freedom to debate the photographs and to come to their own conclusions.¹⁷ Implicit in the term ‘artocracy’ we find an interesting combination of aesthetic practice and democratic self-determination that is no doubt a key element in the project overall: the foregrounding of art as means to self-determination or, at least, a form of civil self-organization.

In the project, moreover, we can see an aesthetic gambit—the positioning of images in a public space—with a view to provoking debate. *Inside Out* would also appear to be concerned with occupying cultural territory and allowing access to it through images and symbols, an intention that re-emerged in the essay by Meriem Bouderbala, quoted earlier, which accompanied *Printemps des Arts* in 2012. However, interestingly, the first incarnation of *Inside Out*, in the town of La Goulette, a suburb north of Tunis and not far from Le Kram, was met with a less than sympathetic response when local people angrily objected to it and the project was abandoned. Furthermore, posters pasted on the Porte de France in central Tunis were summarily torn down. The former incarnation of this project in La Goulette, despite government authorization (and therefore tacit support for the promotion of cultural production within the context of civil space and public debate), would appear to highlight the sensitivities surrounding the use of public space—who has the right to use it and who is barred from using it—that formed one of the key areas of outright protest in Tunisia in the early part of 2011. Although the precise reasons for the defacement of the original posters remain obscure (and could have had more to do with the legacy of covert surveillance procedures in a former police state), such reactions highlight the fact that visual culture remains a potent topic for the population of Tunisia as a whole, and not just for so-called extremists.

Whilst the Palais Abdelliya affair was largely focused on the private space of an art institution (which the public could enter), *Inside Out: Artocracy in Tunisia* was very much about public, civil space in which a cultural project was staged. Public and private rub up against one another here in forceful and unpredictable ways and this is perhaps part of the problem with developing civil society in general: the opposition between public morals and private beliefs is precisely what civil society sets out to accommodate, but this is



▲ Héla Ammar, *Sidi Bouzid*, 2011. Courtesy the artist.



▲ Héla Ammar, *La Marsa*, 2011. Courtesy the artist.

only possible if the space produced answers to a common good that benefits all. The common good must remain precisely that: common to all. What both events exposed is the manner in which artistic practices, in their ineluctable relationship to civil society and public space, are firmly on the frontline of key constitutional and political debates, regardless of the subject matter being addressed in actual artworks or practices. What *Inside Out: Artocracy in Tunisia* highlighted, intentionally or otherwise, was the fact that civil society cannot be controlled by culture—nor the state or the market for that matter—but remains a site of antagonistic and agonistic forces that do not necessarily yield to the liberal ideal of consensus. In the historical absence of civil society, its emergence can provide potential flashpoints even for those who actively support it as a welcome development for countries emerging from decades of despotism.

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In its proposition of a collective, mutually engaging and shared sense of the social sphere that works in the name of a common societal good (and, thereafter, for the common good of the many and not just the few), the term civil society increasingly indicates public activities that include but are not limited to political self-organization, community-based action, a concern for human rights, quality of life, and the collective expression through cultural events.¹⁸ This ambition has become a key component for a number of art institutions across North Africa and the Middle East that actively promote the relationship between artistic practices and civil society. I would note here, in particular, Christine Tohme's articulation of the goal of Ashkal Alwan, a leading arts organization based in Beirut. As Tohme observes,

I am interested in creating civic pockets. We have lost our public spaces today because the control over such spaces is unfortunately decided by the victor—the victor always dominates public space. It is always the winner who controls the space. I am interested in these small pockets that exist outside of the system and outside of the public spaces where national discourses dominate; where you find a seepage between the artistic and the civic.¹⁹

Elsewhere, Dar al Ma'mûn, based in Marrakech, foregrounds questions of public space and civil society in their programme and institutional dialogues.²⁰ Returning to Beirut, the arts organization Zico House similarly promotes itself as a civil society organization for culture and development. In Iraq, the Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Art (RUYA), the commissioners of the official Iraq Pavilion for the 55th Venice Biennale, likewise places prominent emphasis on creating 'a network of intercultural events that can contribute to the development of civil society in Iraq'.²¹

This is admittedly a cursory overview of organizations that foreground the relationship between visual culture and civil society across the Middle East, and we should note that the terms civil society and civil space are not necessarily being used as a counterpart to how they are understood in, say, Britain or France; nor is there a suggestion that civil society can be transposed to the region as a guarantor for the emergence and sustainability of public space for debate and disagreement. To suggest as much is of the same order of delusion that promotes Western-style 'democracy' and consensus in the region as the only possible solution to what has been decades of cultural, political, social and economic malaise.²² However, community-based, cooperative-inclined, non-state-funded, and not-for-profit organizations, in whatever form they take (be they cultural or otherwise), are crucial to the development of a common ground upon which a social and political order can fully emerge and actualize real change through forms of disagreement and dialogue.²³

When the term civil society is applied to Muslim countries, however, it is often viewed as a form of Westernization that is both secular and anti-religious. For Hanan Hanafi, this generalization merely confuses the issue: whilst the concept of civil society is indeed a Western one (and focused on individual relations within the public sphere), most of its key features are to be found in both Islamic ethical theory and Islamic institutions. The appeal to civil society needs to be thereafter understood alongside the reformist, modernist legacy that was successively quashed by despotism and, increasingly, extremism in the region.²⁴ 'Islamic theory and practice', Hanafi proposes,

sustain a number of legitimate groupings existing between the state and the individual. These groupings are endowed with their own sphere of autonomy, free from government intrusion, which made Islamic societies historically far less monolithic and undifferentiated than some Western stereotypes of a theocratic society would allow.²⁵

Similarly, for Tariq Ramadan, continuing on from his argument as previously outlined above, civil society allows for an active engagement with Islamic heritage:

As Arab societies awaken, as peoples achieve political liberation, to invoke Islam needs to liberate minds through the acquisition of knowledge, autonomous rationality, critical thinking and freedom of thought: the very definition of pluralism, responsible citizenship, and of civil society that functions as an interface between institutions and the state.²⁶

Amongst the institutions addressed by Hanafi are ones that effectively operationalize the actual concept of civil society. The wielder of power (variously the *imam*, *khalifa* or *sultan*), for example, was always attended by the *'ulama*: those charged with interpreting the intention of the law (*shari'a*). That this process was open to abuse is undoubted; however, in theory, the *'ulama* were intended to be independent of political authority and thereafter able to maintain the checks and balances needed to curtail power if necessary. Implied here is the informal bulwark needed—the safety net between the power of the state and the individual—if civil society is to emerge as anything more than an abstract ideal.²⁷ To these already potent elements, Hanafi also addresses the *diwan al-mazalim*, a small claims court of popular appeal, and the *mazalim* court, to which any Muslim can appeal if an injustice has been done to him by a rule or the ruler's agent. It is notable how the event that ignited the uprisings across the region in December 2010 was arguably caused by the very absence of courts of civil appeal such as the *diwan al-mazalim*. The event in question involved the actions of Mohamed Bouazizi, an unemployed Tunisian attempting to make ends meet by selling vegetables from a cart, who was subsequently harassed and slapped in the face by a municipal official, had his wares and scales confiscated and who, when denied a fair hearing to air his grievances, committed himself to an unforgiving act of self-immolation. The conflagration that followed has been well documented and its effects are still unfolding across the region.²⁸

Suggesting that civil society has an objective and verifiable place in Muslim society today is to note, alongside Hanafi, that the threat to civil society is not related to Islamic definitions of the idea *per se*, but to the historical legacy of despotic governments and an over-zealous determination of who has the right to speak—when, where and to whom—in the context of public space. It is precisely the call for reform and pluralism that started the uprisings across the region after, as noted, decades of cultural, political, social and economic malaise. One further feature of that malaise was the effective subjugation and outlawing of the institutions, cultural or otherwise, associated with civil society. Hanafi observes that the failure of Islamic modernism and secular nationalism, not to mention the ideal of pan-Arabism, has effectively played into the hands of fundamentalism and the forces of conservatism.²⁹

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If we can argue that politics is reflected in the sum of power relationships that exists in a given sociopolitical order, then any reflection upon that order or any broadening of those relations effects a change in how we view and engage with the political. And that, in and of itself, is a political act: to change how people engage, what they see, how they interact and what they hear (and indeed fear), can only ever be political in its effect. Thereafter we must observe that the innate power of the political, for many, is the ability to determine what is and

what is not political as such, just as Mehdi Mabrouk attempted to do in his proscription of art from the political realm in the wake of the furore surrounding *Printemps des Arts*. Any expansion or retraction of the political order, and who has access to it, is an interjection into the syntax and logic of producing meaning and sense. In the moment of redefining the realm and scope of the political, and the core debate about what constitutes public, private and civil space within that order of the political, new forms of subjecthood, in sum, can be articulated, as can new forms of protest.³⁰

So, what role will culture play in the formulation of civil society, not to mention forms of civil protest, in countries where dissent can still result in imprisonment or worse? What place do cultural organizations have in the Middle East when it comes to the broader social, political and historical structure of those environments? I want to return to where we more or less began and end with a quote from Rancière, who proposes that '[t]here exists a specific sensory experience—the aesthetic—that holds the promise of both a new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community'.³¹ Artistic practice opens up a horizon of future possibility within which civic imagination can flourish. Indeed, art as a practice contributes to the forms that civic space assumes whilst also engaging with public space through various modalities of engagement and resistance. To this end, support for the potentiality inherent within cultural practices and the way in which they are already involved in the context of (and support for) civil society is not only needed, but remains essential to the success of the political sphere. The need for supporters of the arts to develop new strategies for supporting the common good, common ground and communal-based practices of art as an institution has never been greater than it is now in the context of, for example, Tunisia, where civil society is precisely that which is most under threat after what for many must have appeared an interminable hibernation. This is not, finally, about art as a form of political protest (an all too easily co-opted cultural paradigm), nor is this to confuse the artist as protestor (or vice versa). Rather, this is about the potential of art as a practice to open up horizons of possibility for civic imaginations to emerge, and be thereafter supported within a community-based network of social relations that remain independent of the diktats of politics, the edicts of religion and the deterministic, often divisive, rationale of the market.

1. This essay is an extensively revised and extended version of two earlier essays: 'Common Grounds: Artistic Practices, Civil Society, and Secular Determination in Tunisia Today', published in *Ibraaz.org* and *ArteEast.org*. Available at <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/45/> (accessed 21 December 2013); and an essay co-published with *ArteEast* in *ArteZine*, guest edited by Ceren Erdem and entitled 'ANEW: Retelling the Stories of The Past and The Future'. Available at <http://arteeast.org/pages/artenews/ANEW/1549/> accessed 21 December 2013).
2. Jacques Rancière, 'The Paradoxes of Political Art', in Steve Corcoran (ed. and trans.), *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (Continuum: London, 2012), pp. 134–51, p. 149.
3. Tariq Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening: Islam and the New Middle East* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), p. 159.
4. The question of how blasphemy and the accusation of apostasy is stifling and delegitimizing critical and political debate across the Muslim world has been examined by Paul Marshall and Nina Shea in their comprehensive volume, *Silenced: How Apostasy and Blasphemy Codes Are Choking Freedom Worldwide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2011 passim. Marshall and Shea argue that the accusations of 'blasphemy', 'apostasy' or 'insulting Islam' are deployed with increasing regularity and results, by both authoritarian governments and extremist forces in the Muslim world, to stifle debate and consolidate power. Interestingly, they argue, this is not just aimed at internal opposition groups and religious minorities, but external events, such as the furore in 2005 over the cartoons, drawn by Danish national Kurt Westergaard, satirizing Islamic terrorism.
5. Quoted in Rachida Triki, 'Freedom to Express: The Abdelliya Affair', first published 23 August 2012. Available at www.tunisia-live.net/2012/06/11/artworks-and-property-vandalized-during-a-night-of-tension-in-tunis/. <http://www.ibraaz.org/news/30> (accessed 21 December 2013).
6. It is unclear at the time of writing whether or not this was a Salafi-inspired protest or a more generalized one. What is clear is that Salafites in Tunisia want to see a more prominent role for Islam in both government and society, and that in itself brings it into conflict with secular culture. For fuller details of the events and aftermath, see Triki, 'Freedom to Express: The Abdelliya Affair'.
7. This reading of certain elements in the show, specifically Faten Gaddes' prominently displayed *The Ring, 2011*, is supported by Farah Makni Hendaoui, a researcher and exhibitor in *Le Printemps des Arts*. For full details, see: 'The Crisis of Art in Tunisia', *Ibraaz*, 28 August 2013. Available at <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/73> (accessed 2 January 2014).
8. On 6 February 2013, the Tunisian opposition politician Chokri Belaid, leader of the secularist Democratic Patriots Movement, was shot dead outside his home in Tunis. Later that year, on 25 July, another opposition leader, Mohamed Brahmî (leader of the nationalist Movement of the People Party), was assassinated in Tunis. Whilst this does not necessarily augur a return to despotism, it does not bode well for the freedom of speech and political opposition parties in Tunisia. On 26 January 2014, however, the Tunisian National Assembly signed into law a new constitution that is widely seen across the region as the most progressive.
9. Ramadan is explicit in this context, arguing that 'under no circumstances must the expression of civil society be stifled; elected representatives must hear its demands, and the field of politics itself must be open to constant ethical questioning: the essence of good governance (*alḥukm ar-rāshid*). See Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening*, p. 118.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
11. It is notable that, under the rubric of neoliberalism, the accountability of government—its responsibility to provide adequate welfare services and support for culture—is devolved to the rhetoric of citizen empowerment, inclusion, enfranchisement, choice and compulsory voluntarism, all terms that find a comfortable degree of cross-over in the rhetoric associated with so-called 'relational aesthetics' and a substantial amount of collaborative- and participative-based work. For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Anthony Downey, 'Towards a Politics of (Relational) Aesthetics', *Third Text* 21/3 (2007), pp. 267–75.
12. Defined by Antonio Gramsci as 'society minus the state', civil society is coterminous with a vigorous social order, if not democracy, and suggests the absence of repression, be it in the form of state tyranny or subjugation to the market: 'between the economic structure and the state with its legislation and coercion, Gramsci suggests, 'stands civil society'. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p. 209.
13. For Jürgen Habermas, one of the key theorists of civil society, the latter is largely defined as a series of 'associations, organizations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere'. Civil society, in this context, 'institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres'. See Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1996), p. 366.

14. Habermas is key here to understanding the role of aesthetics in the development of public and civic society. In *Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, he argues that the development of the field of literary criticism and aesthetics, from the late seventeenth century onwards, effected a space for citizens to think and act independently. It was this independence of thought, Habermas argues, that further promoted self-reflection on the nature of political action and what it is to be a political agent. See Jürgen Habermas, *Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), passim.
15. See 'Tunisia: Artists Under Attack', <http://artsfreedom.org/?p=1439>, 22 June 2012.
16. The aftermath of this affair in Tunisia has had further repercussions that are still subject to scrutiny and debate. In a letter dated 13 September 2012, Human Rights Watch addressed members of the Tunisian National Constituent Assembly who had just released a draft constitution made public by the National Constituent Assembly on 8 August 2012. In the letter, the authors noted that although the draft Constitution upheld 'many key civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights', including 'freedom of movement; freedom to assemble and associate', the articles contained therein also undermined basic human rights, including 'freedom of expression, women's rights, the principle of non-discrimination and freedom of thought and conscience'. On the explicit subject of freedom of expression, the letter argued that 'Article 26 of the draft constitution provides that freedom of opinion, expression, information and creation is guaranteed and can be limited only by laws designed to protect the rights of others, their reputation, security and health. However, draft article 3 threatens freedom of expression by stipulating that "The State guarantees freedom of belief and religious practice and criminalizes all attacks on the sacred." This provision, which defines neither what is "sacred" nor what constitutes an "attack" on it, opens the door to laws that criminalize speech.' These concerns have very real and verifiable effects in a country where social and civic space—within which culture thrives—has become an increasingly charged venue for protest and community-based forms of self-organization.
17. For more information on the project see Yasmine Ryan, 'Art Challenges Tunisian Revolutionaries', Al Jazeera. Available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/in-depth/features/2011/03/201132223217876176.html>.
18. These concerns have been mirrored in political calls for the reinforcement of civil society as a bulwark against the remit of neoliberal ideology and the apparent ascendancy of the market. George Yúdice, for one, sees this as central to the shift in political focus for movements involved in revolutionary reform. Yúdice writes: 'Civil society has become the concept of choice as many movements for reform and revolution have been chastened by the eviction of socialism as a political alternative, at least for the near future. The current dominance of neoliberalism—the set of policies that include trade liberalization, privatization, the reduction (and, in some cases, near elimination) of state-subsidised social services such as health care and education, the lowering of wages, and evisceration of labour rights – has contributed to the left's shift in political attention from the takeover of state power (which in many cases has not resolved the question of sovereignty) to issues of civil and human rights quality of life.' See George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 5.
19. See 'Home Workspace: A Conversation between Christine Tohme and Anthony Downey', 2 May 2012. Available at www.ibraaz.org/interviews/24.
20. Omar Berrada, the director of the library and translation centre at Dar al Ma'mûn, suggests that 'the questions of public space and of civil society have been with us since the beginning, as we were trying to avoid creating a mere retreat for artists, a luxurious ivory tower for intellectuals in the middle of nowhere—precisely because the countryside is not "nowhere".' His response was part of a larger survey of institutional contexts and the role of art in the development of civil society across the region. The survey was carried out by Ibraaz and all responses can be read at: <http://www.ibraaz.org/platforms/3>, 2 May 2012 (accessed 4 January 2013).
21. RUYA is officially registered by the Iraq Commission for Civil Society Enterprises, and its mission statement in full reads: 'The foundation's [RYUA's] initial goal is to promote culture in Iraq at a time when priorities are focused elsewhere, and to build a platform that will enable Iraqis in the arts, the young in particular, to benefit from, and participate in international events. In addition to supporting local projects, its aim is to create a network of intercultural events that can contribute to the development of civil society in Iraq. It is also committed to nurturing a multicultural dialogue through the arts.' See <http://ruyafoundation.org/mission/> (accessed 4 January 2013).
22. I borrow this notion of malaise from Samir Kassir's *Being Arab* (London: Verso, 2006 [2004]).

23. It is all the more crucial here that I offer, however provisionally, a degree of distinction between so-called non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the institutions of civil society, especially as both can become confused and NGOs offer much by way of support for cultural activities. NGOs also contribute to the stabilization of civil society in post-conflict countries, but civil society itself cannot entirely rely upon NGOs to further expand the realm of the civic. Whilst this is not necessarily the best place to go into these debates, it is notable that the majority of NGOs began as humanitarian vehicles in the area of economic development, but have quickly extended into social and political spheres. This has given rise to a series of criticisms when it comes to examining how such organizations can effect neocolonial cultural and political agendas and become conduits for the international regulatory systems of global capitalism. For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Tina Wallace, 'NGO Dilemmas: Trojan Horses for Global Neoliberalism', *Socialist Register*, 40 (2004), pp. 202-19.
24. Hanan Hanafi, 'Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society: A Reflective Islamic Approach', in Simon Chambers and Will Kymlicka (eds), *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 171-89.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
26. Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening*, p. 91.
27. Hanafi lists a further series of subsidiary institutions which are intended to bridge the executive power of the *imam* and the judicial authority of the *ulama*, including the concept of *hisha*, which protects the individual against monopolization in market places and usury. Other institutions, including *awqaf*, a form of religious endowment to scientific, literary and academic foundations, allows individuals to endow scholarships, schools, publications and universities without government interference.
28. I have written elsewhere on this event, in 'Beyond the Former Middle East: Aesthetics, Civil Society, and the Politics of Representation', 1 June 2011. Available at <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/8>.
29. When Islamic movements were delegitimized as component elements of civil society, in the wake of secular, nationalist state formation, they turned their attentions to mass media, labour unions, professional associations and NGOs. 'Elements that are not allowed to compete for popular support within civil society will inevitably become as averse to the values of civil society as those who suppress them. It is hardly surprising therefore that fundamentalist groups employ the traditional accusation of anathema, false innovation, and heresy against artists, thinkers, writers, professors ...' See Hanafi, 'Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society', pp. 186-7.
30. The political subject for Rancière challenges the 'symbolic structuration' of the community that abolished dissensus in the first place and is thereafter engaged in a process of non-identification with the distribution of the sensible in which he or she finds themselves. Subsequently, non-identification with a given order becomes a moment of instantiating political subjectivity as it introduces dissensus, the latter a disagreement with the established framework of perception/distribution of the sensible that effectively ushers in, as opposed to consensus, politics proper. Rancière writes: 'Through the process of subjectivization, political subjects [*le Sujet politique*] bring politics proper into existence and confront the police order with the heterology of emancipation.' Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, , 2004), p. 90.
31. Jacques Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy', *New Left Review* (March/April 2002), pp. 133-51, p. 133.